THE CONGRESS BOOKS: No. 34

EPISCOPACY

By LEONARD PRESTIGE, B.D.

Rector of Upper Heyford, Oxon.,
Examining Chaplain to the Bishop of
Oxford, late Fellow of New College

THE CONGRESS BOOKS

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Episcopacy

THE purpose of this book is not to show that without bishops there would be no Church, and probably before long no Christianity; that task will be attempted elsewhere. But its purpose is to sketch some of the things a bishop ought to be, and to indicate some of the ways in which Catholics may rightly expect their bishops to be able to help them.

Unfortunately, it must be admitted that at present our English bishops as a whole are overworked and comparatively inefficient as spiritual forces, because their dioceses are usually far too large. If we were as well staffed with bishops to-day as the Church was for the first few hundred years of her existence, we should have as many bishops as we now have rural deans. Now nobody wants to make

'Bishops in their shovel hats'
As 'plentiful as tabby cats':

that certainly would be 'too many.' The Church has found by experience that a good deal of what was once episcopal work and episcopal responsibility can fitly be delegated,

and that by so delegating it she is the better able to serve Christ in the ministry of souls.

But you can object to a flood without desiring a drought: and to-day there is a drought of bishops. We are the heirs, in this matter, of a great legacy of evil from the Middle Ages. Dioceses then were of an enormous size, because a bishop in those days had to be a great lord as well as a chief priest, and men were afraid of making either the lords too many or the office less lordly. But this evil system has been perpetuated with but little improvement down to the present day.

The consequence is that the responsible bishop of a diocese is surrounded by a cloud of officials, each engaged in doing for him some of his different duties; a cloud so thick that not only is it extremely difficult for any one to get sight of the bishop, but he himself does not always even know what his own officials are doing in his name. It goes without saying that he usually has only the vaguest idea of the work and spiritual condition of the parishes which compose his diocese, and that his own influence upon them is practically negligible.

People sometimes say that the way to get over the difficulty is to give each responsible bishop of a diocese a larger number of assistant bishops, or, as they are sometimes called, 'suffragan bishops.' That plan certainly might be made to secure that the sacrament of

confirmation should be more accessible than it sometimes is, and that the burden of certain routine work should be less overwhelming. But it would not provide for the reformation of the root trouble, which is that one man is physically and mentally incapable of discharging the responsible oversight which is required of the bishops of many modern English dioceses. That responsibility would still remain upon the diocesan bishop, however many assistants he had. For a suffragan bishop has no responsibility of his own: he may be likened to a useful instrument such as a bellows or to a channel of communication such as a service pipe; but he is not the man who blows; he is not the fountain-head.

A rather similar plan was actually tried in one part of the Church, and discarded as being found wanting. When Ireland first became Christian, the Church was administered in that island by the abbots of the monasteries; and the abbots used to keep among their monks men who had been consecrated bishops, in order to provide that strictly episcopal functions should be duly discharged as need might arise. Thus by these 'persons in episcopal orders' priests were ordained and confirmation was administered, but they had none of the responsibility of oversight. This system came to an end, because it was not real episcopacy. For a bishop should be more than a mere person in episcopal orders: he

is, properly, a successor of the apostles, by whom under God the original foundations of the different churches of Christendom were established.

HOW, then, can we distinguish the different aspects of a bishop's calling?

First of all, he is a high priest. He alone possesses in its fullness the earthly priesthood entrusted by our Lord to human agents for the nurture and edification of souls. This is shown by the fact that the bishop alone can ordain others. So parochial ministers are really the delegates or local assistants of the bishop, and have to be licensed or 'instituted' by him before they have any right to exercise their ministry within his diocese. In fact, in the writings of that great archbishop and Father of the Church, St. Cyprian, the word priest (*sacerdos*) is usually confined to bishops, and those we ordinarily call priests he calls presbyters.

The first thing, therefore, that we look for in a bishop is priestliness. Naturally, he is a conspicuous person, 'a city set upon a hill'; and his life and character might be expected to provide 'an example of good works unto others' and to be godly and holy. He must be a man of prayer. But as a priest and example of priestly conduct he will, above all, show untiring devotion and diligence in

the work which is specially characteristic of a priest, the regular offering to God of the daily liturgical prayers and the celebration of the holy sacrifice of the altar.

That is the example given to the Church by the apostles, from whom Christians first learned to continue 'stedfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the Breaking of Bread and the prayers' (*Acts* ii. 42). We may, therefore, look to our bishops to offer day by day the holy Eucharist for us and with us, and to draw us all therein together nearer God by the power of their fatherly intercession. So will they be indeed the high priests of the people of God.

Not only is the bishop a high priest: he is also the head of the other priests. One title, which the Ordination Service of the Church of England directs to be applied to him, is 'Reverend Father in God.' Now the bishop is the father in God of all his flock, and any one should be able to have access to him in time of need. But he clearly cannot minister personally to every one of the people in his charge, so he has other clergy under him to perform the ordinary ministrations, and sends them to the places where their special work lies. 'How shall they preach except they be sent?' The bishop, then, is the person who 'sends' them, and that makes the connexion between bishop and clergy particularly close. But he also does far more for them than that.

He it is who in ordination begets them to their new life of priesthood, just as St. Paul so begat Timothy, and calls him his 'beloved child' (*2 Tim.* i. 2), which makes him in a special way the father of his clergy. So one of his first and chief duties is to exercise a loving and fatherly oversight of them, caring for all their needs both spiritual and temporal, helping and advising them in their difficulties, supporting them in their work, and doing his utmost to maintain them as a happy and united family of brethren.

Now in the course of any profession there may arise cases of special importance or difficulty when it is advisable for a man not to act alone, but to take others into professional consultation with him. That is constantly done, for instance, by physicians and lawyers. And in the Church there is a special method of taking formal consultation between a bishop and his clergy, and if necessary of registering their decisions, in the holding of an assemblage of the clergy under the presidency of the bishop. This is called the 'Sacred Synod' of the diocese. In the synod not only can the clergy consult their bishop, and learn from him some of the accumulated store of experience which a man ought to acquire who is in touch with the life of so many different parishes; but the bishop can also consult his clergy. And this is the more necessary, since it is the clergy who, for the most part, are in

daily and personal contact with the people, and have the most direct knowledge of their problems and circumstances.

As in a family, so it is in the Church. A wise father with a large family of grown-up sons, and a wise bishop, with his great family of priests, may often have as much to learn from them as they from him. And in order to avoid overlooking any source or element of useful counsel, and to be free from that great curse of the Church of England, bureaucracy, the bishop must not merely ask advice or information from a selected coterie, but from all the clergy whom God has set under him.

IF the bishop is chief priest, as has just been shown, he is none the less chief pastor, too, as were the apostles before him. Now the main pastoral work of a diocese lies in the parishes. It is there for the most part that the young in every generation are converted to Christ, that the faithful are fed with the means of grace and edified in life and understanding, and that search is made for the sheep which have gone astray. Therefore a parish can hardly be said to be in a healthy and normal state of working, unless it has the strength and support of its chief pastor behind all its religious activities. And to be in a thoroughly healthy condition a parish must

not only possess this support, but be conscious of the possession.

In an efficient army every battalion, whatever its straits for the time being, knows that it is not isolated: it is one unit in a larger whole: it has somewhere other units working with it and co-operating in the execution of a single scheme: and therefore it needs not to rely solely on its own strength and resources, for it has behind it the whole force and brains of the army of which it is a part. So in a parish there ought to be the sense that the clergy and congregation of faithful have behind them the support of the whole diocese, and in particular of the bishop who is the chief pastor of the whole body.

The only practical way in which this feeling may be realized is by the bishop coming regularly and systematically into every parish and bearing his part in its normal activities. A parish in which the bishop is unknown by sight to the bulk of his flock is a fold which is not properly shepherded. The bishop should, from time to time, visit every parish in his cure, worship and celebrate Mass with the congregation, encourage the faithful, preach to the unconverted, and confirm the children in their own church, which is the only spiritual home they know. It is a very grave hindrance to religion that at present the activities of the bishop are regarded as an 'extra,' which a great number of the people think they can

very well do without; with the result that the sacrament of confirmation is neglected, and whole parishes are saturated with the narrow-minded belief that nothing matters outside their own immediate borders and their own particular interests.

There may also occur at times occasions when the special intervention of the bishop is urgently required in a parish. Some important question of policy may have to be decided, upon which, even if there is no local difference of opinion about the step to be taken, it may be advisable to secure the verdict of a wise and impartial judgement. The proposal to open or to close a Church school might well be such a question; since the project would concern far more than the parish immediately concerned. Or, again, some moral crisis might arise of a public character, like the moral crisis with which St. Paul had to deal at Corinth, when the protest of the local priest would almost certainly be taken as a partisan decision. The only proper person to be called upon in such a case to deliver an impartial judgement after hearing all sides of the dispute, is the bishop and chief pastor of the flock.

It need not be forgotten that the bishop has pastoral duties of a peculiar character towards special classes of people in the diocese who may not fall within the scope of any parochial organization. There are sometimes

shifting populations at both ends of the social scale with which he needs to keep in touch; and there are certain kinds of work which must ordinarily be undertaken by diocesan effort rather than by individual parishes, such as rescue work or missions to the deaf and dumb. And it is very necessary that Christian influence should be brought to bear on municipal and public life. Some of this work must probably always be the actual personal concern of the bishop. But wholly to identify such work with the normal functions of the bishop means the practical annihilation of episcopacy. Almost all these objects of activity are in fact abnormal. The main pastoral duty of a bishop is to support the normal and everyday life of the Church manifested in the parishes.

Further, there is a great danger for any one, be he bishop or otherwise, who confines his energies and his intimacies mainly to specialized kinds of work and particular classes of people; the danger that he himself may completely lose touch with ordinary things, and yet remain unconscious of his failure. Bishops tend to be surrounded with so-called 'representative' people, both clerical and lay; and their peculiar danger is to think that the views of these 'representative' persons are typical of the rest. The truth often is, that these 'representatives' are distinguished and stand out from among ordinary folk solely because there is about them something extraordinary

in mind or character or circumstances; and for that very reason their aims and advice are frequently repudiated and rejected by the ordinary folk whom they are supposed to represent. What will save the bishop from this pitfall is so to exercise his pastorate as to have an intimate first-hand acquaintance with a number of quite ordinary, and therefore in a true sense typical, members of his diocese.

NEXT, the bishop is the chief teacher, and like the apostles once again in that; for they were sent to teach all nations and bear witness to the things which they had learned from Christ. Not that every bishop need himself be a great scholar or complete theological expert; but he should be sufficient of a student to be able to understand such points as may be at issue, and competent enough at any rate to make adequate use of the scholarship of others who may be experts. In fact, in the Church of England a bishop is required before his consecration, publicly to pledge himself to study.

But it is not part of a bishop's duty to teach any and every subject; his mission as a teacher is to expound the gospel, or good news from God to mankind. Now the gospel not only contains certain facts about Christ, but also implies certain truths about God, and involves certain views about the method which

the Holy Ghost employs to communicate the grace of Christ to the souls of men. And inasmuch as time and experience and the acquisition of new knowledge in other spheres of learning are constantly at work, deepening and broadening and enriching our understanding of the gospel and our insight into its practical application, there is always both matter in plenty for teaching, and at the same time need of care that the faith of the gospel be not overlaid or perverted.

Here, then, lies the duty of the bishop as teacher. He is to make known the gospel, and to guard the purity of its transmission. His private opinions upon any given point are neither inspired nor guaranteed against error; they are worth just as much or as little as those of any other man with similar gifts and opportunities; and his official utterances are only valuable in so far as they give expression to the mind and experience of the Church. 'The things which thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also' (2 *Tim.* ii. 2). 'Be ye imitators of me, even as I also am of Christ. Now I praise you that ye remember me in all things, and hold fast the traditions, even as I delivered them to you' (1 *Cor.* xi. 1, 2).

Both in questions of *doctrine* (that is, 'teaching') and of *discipline* (literally, 'learning,' but applied specially to the treatment of

those who contentiously refuse to learn), the bishop needs to consult the Sacred Synod in order to assist his judgement. For his priests are in their own degree partners with him in bearing official witness to the faith, and in estimating the true bearing of new ideas in the light of the Church's age-long experience both of God and men. But the synod's duty is strictly to advise, and not to dictate; and although a bishop would naturally need to be very sure of his ground before he acted contrary to the generally accepted counsel which his synod might tender him, yet in the end the responsibility for making the decision is the bishop's alone. So that, while it might well be held to be uncanonical procedure on the bishop's part if he were to take action in some grave or novel matter without first consulting his clergy in synod, yet after consultation he is not constrained to follow their advice; and no amount of consultation can release him from responsibility for the final action taken.[1]

HITHERTO we have considered the bishop only as the head of his own diocese; but he is also its leader and representative in dealings with other bodies both ecclesiastical and secular. In particular, he is the link of inter-

[1] See on the whole question of synods, *The Diocesan Synod in the Church of England* (S.P.C.K., 6d.), or Sparrow Simpson, *The Diocesan Synod* (S.P.C.K., 1s. 3d.).

diocesan unity. From the beginning it was found that separate dioceses could not either bear effective witness or organize satisfactory regulations if they stood alone; local peculiarities, though they have their proper place, must yet be subordinate to the general well-being. Consequently, just as the custom became established for the bishop to take formal advice within his diocese from those qualified to give it, so the rule was formed that, on important questions affecting the Church at large, all the bishops of a district, after seeking the counsel of their own dioceses, should meet and come to joint decisions. In this way, through the pressure of practical needs, grew up the system of Provincial Synods, or meetings of bishops held under the presidency of the chief bishop of the neighbourhood, usually called the archbishop, or metropolitan; and beyond the area of a single province still wider synods were required, consisting of the bishops of a nation, or of several nations, or, indeed, occasionally (so many as might be able to be gathered) of the whole Church.[1] Roughly speaking, except in the Roman communion, churches are now

[1] In ancient times the system was developed methodically, until all Christendom was divided into a small number of 'patriarchates.' This scheme has broken down; in the East, owing to changes in the relative size and importance of patriarchates; in the West, owing to excessive centralization; and in both, because the centres of political organization (from which the system was copied) have shifted.

mostly organized in national or regional groups, as practical utility may dictate, with corresponding synods.[1]

Provincial and even wider synods cannot, any more than diocesan synods, commit the Church to any new gospel. The bishops who compose them come together as ambassadors, each with the weight of his diocesan witness behind him, all with the sole object of testifying to the common faith of Christendom and of taking practical measures for its preservation, elucidation, and extension. Each and all, whatever their worldly rank or importance in men's eyes, are ministers of Jesus Christ and servants of his Church, Priests and Pastors, Teachers and Witnesses. Their importance is not due to the fact that they are human leaders and governors (though from necessity they are both these things); nor is it their primary duty to preserve an organization or perpetuate a system. Their duty is to minister the gospel; their importance consists in that they occupy the seats of the apostles, and represent on earth the eyes and voice and hands of Jesus Christ.

[1] In the Lambeth Conference (which is not a synod) there exists the framework upon which in the future a synod of the Anglican communion might be made to rest.

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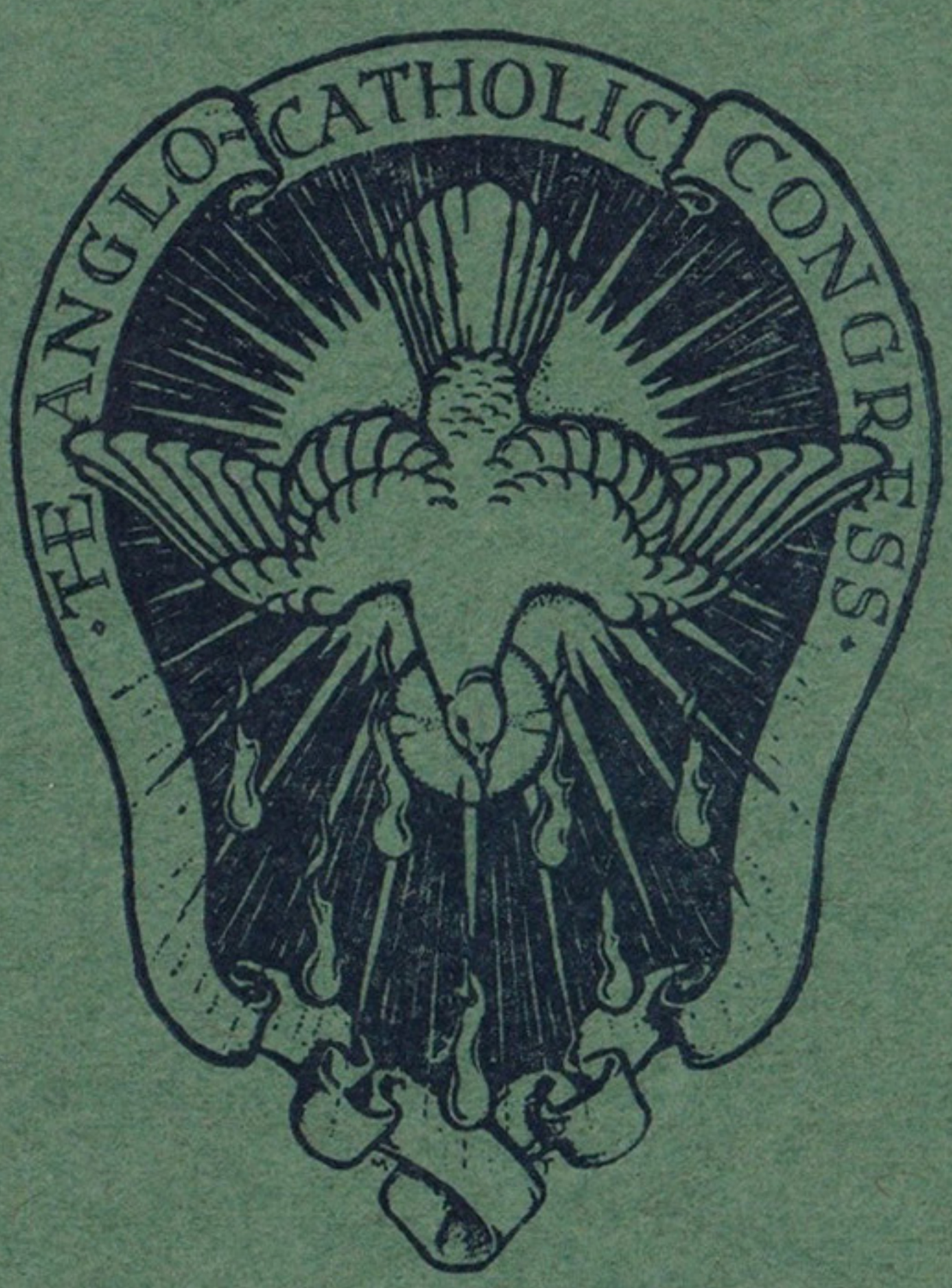

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